For 26 years, Deborah J. Colesa has been a chief technician in the laboratory of Bryan E. Pfingst, Ph.D., a professor of otolaryngology-head and neck surgery whose research includes the development and improvement of auditory prostheses to provide hearing to deaf and severely hearing impaired individuals. During that time, Colesa has become proficient in cochlear implant surgeries in guinea pigs, assisting with more than 275 procedures. Her work provides Dr. Pfingst and other researchers with an important model for studies relevant to hearing-preservation cochlear-implant surgeries now being performed in patients.

Colesa’s colleagues cite her deep knowledge of animal psychophysics, guinea pig physiology and inner ear anatomy, surgical skills and care requirements for advancing the research mission of the institute. This includes developing and maintaining outstanding handling and care procedures for guinea pigs, work that has been shared with others. Her ability to advance knowledge at Michigan and around the global research community, they say, exemplifies the collaborative spirit that she brings to the Kresge Hearing Research Institute (KHRI) environment.

One KHRI faculty member said that while students come, train and leave, a core of technical assistants maintain the expertise and experience needed to run science projects. In some cases, he adds, a few exceptional assistants also can push the envelope technologically and scientifically, and contribute to the overall competitive and successful research enterprise. He placed Colesa at the top of that list.

“I like the diversity of my job and all the wonderful people I have met and work with,” Colesa says. “I am grateful for the wonderful faculty I work for, all the support they have given me, and for making me feel a valued part of their labs by taking the time to nominate me for this award. I am very honored to have won this award, because I know there are many worthy and hardworking staff that deserve this award.”

Away from her job, in addition to playing volleyball and spending time with family, Colesa says one of her favorite activities is singing with her band Counterpoint. Her ability to belt out a tune is appropriate, for many faculty and staff within the Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery sing her praises on a daily basis. If they were to assign a theme song to one of their favorite colleagues, and recipient of this year’s Professional Staff of the Year Award, it might be Tina Turner’s “Simply the Best.”

“Debbie has reached a high level of professional skill and is essential to the research efforts of our laboratory, the collaborations that she has helped establish with other laboratories and the broader research and health community.”

— Bryan E. Pfingst, Ph.D., professor, Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery